By Larry Platt

Now that the election-year shouting is over and the star turn of Tom Smith's mother has passed, we're left with the same president and a Congress that is the most ideologically polarized in 130 years. Last year, according to Congressional Quarterly, Congress set a new "party unity" record, with the majorities of each party voting against the other nearly 80 percent of the time.

It didn't used to be like this. When I was growing up, there were practical problem-solvers on both sides, like Democrat Henry "Scoop" Jackson in the Senate and - locally - Republican Larry Coughlin in the House.

Reasons for the extinction of this political species range from the takeover of primary season by extreme voices to the 24-hour news cycle, which seems to reward the loud over the thoughtful. But perhaps the least understood is the most basic of all: Our elected leaders don't hang out. Democrats and Republicans in Washington don't really know each other - in a business that is all about personal relationships.

"It's a sign of the apocalypse that this is even news," Democratic Rep. Peter Welch of Vermont told me when I called him about the cross-party Costco lasagna dinners that he and Illinois Republican Rep. Peter Roskam started hosting in Welch's apartment last year. Five Ds and five Rs regularly break bread together and get to know one another.

Welch says it has paid off. "The combat of politics has become a macho struggle," he says. "That's easy to do when you don't know your opponent. Our dinners have led us to come to see what voters saw in those we disagree with, and understand their point of view."

When Welch's party was in the majority, he could have passed his Home Star energy efficiency bill with just the support of his fellow Democrats on the energy and commerce committee - as was customary. Instead, he visited every Republican member and ended up getting 12 GOP supporters, including Texas' Joe Barton, who is aligned with big oil and questions the validity of global warming science. Ironically, when Welch first ran for the House in 2006 in environmentally friendly Vermont, he used Barton as a bogeyman in his advertising - complete

with the ominous, deep-throated warnings about the need to send Welch to Congress to oppose the likes of "Joe Barton from Texas."

When Barton responded positively to Welch's overture, it was an a-ha moment. "I'm never going to convince Joe Barton on global warming," Welch says. "But after we found common ground on energy efficiency, I told him, 'You know, it's a good thing I didn't know you before I ran for the House and used you in my ads. Because I kind of like you.'"

Welch has found other areas of compromise with members across the aisle. With Idaho's Mike Simpson and Heath Shuler of North Carolina, Welch rallied 60 Democrats and 40 Republicans to urge the Super Committee to consider raising revenues and reforming entitlements. Like his energy-efficiency bill (which passed the House but ran into the buzz saw of the filibuster-obsessed Senate), the bipartisan plea for bold fiscal reform failed, but the germ of something can be found in the process. Despite the off-putting rigidity of each party's leadership, some members have been trying to be what we want them to be: practical leaders who are willing to compromise.

Close to home, Bob Brady, who I followed around with a film crew on Election Day for a possible documentary I'm coproducing, has been one of the stalwarts of bipartisan goodwill. Backroom machine boss Brady? Bipartisan? Really? Though it may sound counterintuitive, yes. In his role as ranking member of the Committee on House Administration, which oversees budget authorization for members' expenses and those of House committees, Brady has been called "Capitol Hill's mayor," someone who can do favors for colleagues. Instead of only rewarding his teammates, Brady let the word go forth across the aisle when he became chairman in 2007: Anything you need - as long as it's legal - is yours.

Brady established a relationship with California Republican Dan Lungren, known as a far-right ideologue. When Brady's party leadership expressed some doubt about his comity with Lungren and their mutual back-scratching, he simply explained: "He's my friend. I'm loyal to my friends." Brady tells me - as Welch, Roskam, Simpson, Shuler, and even Barton have also demonstrated - that Congress would be much more productive if there were more friendships and less ideology.

So how do we get these nascent efforts of working together to become the norm? By taking a page from private industry and subjecting Congress to a pay-for-performance plan, as former FDIC Chair Sheila Bair suggests in this month's Fortune. She proposes that half of a

congressional salary be paid with 10-year Treasury debt that is conditional on hitting certain benchmarks, including labor force participation rate and GDP growth.

The incentives are wrongheaded, as it's not clear that the work of any individual legislator - let alone the Congress as a whole - can directly correlate to those statistics. But what if the benchmark was a "party unity" statistic? If the percentage of time the majority of one party votes against the majority of the other doesn't stay below 65 percent, members start forfeiting part of the value of their Treasury bond compensation package.

I know, I know. That would require members of Congress to voluntarily put part of their own pay package at risk. But it would provide an incentive for what the polls say we all want: representatives who put aside their differences and problem-solve on our behalf. Hey, we just had an election. Now's the time for big ideas, bold dreams, and a refresher of hope, right?